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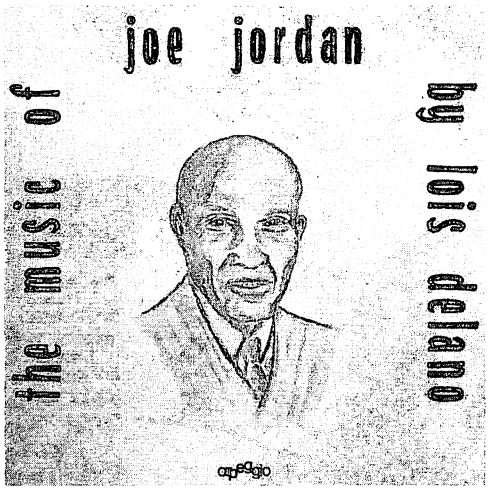


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THE RAGTIME SOCIETY P. O. BOX 520 WESTON ONTARIO CANADA

# THOSE RAGTIME YEARS 1896

by JACK CUFF

This particular year sets the stage for "Those Ragtime Years" which are about to begin and to last for some twenty years or more. It is the year of a closing theme to the overture of years that has served as the musical prelude to a whole new era of musical entertainment.

This is also a year of important technological advances. In Detroit the first commercially practical automobile has emerged following the pioneering work in recent years by Duryea, Haynes, Winton, and Henry Ford. Emile Berliner has been granted a patent for a disk shaped record and reproducing machine that holds much promise in the field of musical entertainment. Motion pictures are starting to be shown to the public as a business venture. Vaudeville theaters are adding movies as a novelty. Nickelodeons, peep-shows, and penny arcades are featuring the outrageously daring movie of "The Widow Jones" displaying a prolonged kiss by May Irwin and John C. Rice. Public decency has been offended by the imposed darkness in nickelodeons. In Los Angeles, an enterprising proprietor of a movie parlor has provided a lighted area with viewing windows into the darkened screening hall for the convenience of its more circumspect patrons.

Preparations are being made in Great Britain and throughout its far-flung Empire to celebrate next year the diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria's accession to the imperial throne in 1837.

Liberal Wilfred Laurier has become the Prime Minister of Canada and begins a term of office that is to last for the next fifteen years. From Canada comes the news that a significant discovery of gold has been made in its Yukon Territory in a region known as the Klondike.

Grover Cleveland still serves the second of his separated terms as President of the United States. The panic and fears surrounding the shortage of gold for exchange purposes, and the uncertain status of silver continues to depress business and to create general unemployment. William Jennings Bryan is the Democratic candidate for president and has gained considerable favour with his "cross-of-gold" speech. William McKinley is the Republican candidate. Utah has acquired statehood as the 45th state of the Union. Of general interest is the inauguration of the free delivery of rural mail throughout the country.

Ex-professional baseball player William ("Billy") Sunday has given up his Y. M. C. A. secretarial job in Chicago and intends to become a full-time evangelist.

In New York, Anna Held has made her American debut at the Herald Square Theater. The enterprising comedians Joe Weber and Lew Fields have successfully opened The Weber and Fields Music Hall. There is news that the popular operetta of Sidney Jones, "The Geisha" company, has a delightful new dancing talent named Isadora Duncan. New York theater audiences are enjoying the introduction of John Philip Sousa's first operetta "El Capitan". At Tony Pastor's Music Hall an entertainer by the name of Ben Harney has introduced a novelty style of piano playing which Harney calls "Rag-time". Although he is a white minstrel, he has captured a feeling for the "Jig" style piano playing so common in recent years with Negro pianists from the midwest areas of Chicago and the Mississippi River as far south as New Orleans. There is a rumor that, because of public interest and the total lack of music in published manuscript form, Harney has started to prepare an instruction book for those who may wish to learn how to play any composition in "Rag-time". Harney has already made a name for himself as a song composer with his composition "You've Been a Good Old Wagon (But You've Done Broke Down)" of last year and currently with his "Mister Johnson, Turn Me Loose".

Also in New York, a negro composer named Frederick A. Mills, has invaded Tin Pan Alley as a publisher of music. Under the name "Kerry" Mills, he has published his composition of last year called "Rastus On Parade" and a new one called "Happy Days In Dixie". The music of Mills is characteristic of the dancing music of the minstrels known as the Cakewalk.

In searching for a beginning to the history of ragtime, it is reasonable to conclude that this year of 1896 is in fact the culminating year of the pre-ragtime era. There is a developing but new kind of unnamed syncopated music being heard, and with increasing frequency, over the past several years. It seems to originate and reside in the folk music of the American Negro. It has been present for years in the spirituals, the songs and the rhythmic shout music often heard at negro gatherings. It is present in the negro cakewalk and popular with both black and white minstrel groups. Now, in recent years, piano players have begun to capture the syncopation that has typified the rhythm of instruments like the banjo, the fiddle, and the tambourine.

Ragtime is not the sudden merging of African drum rhythms with an overlay of European music. The roots of ragtime have been growing slowly. Thomas "Daddy" Rice, Dan Emmett and Ed Christy, long before the American Civil War, had been the founding fathers of the currently popular minstrel shows. Stephen Foster wrote his greatest ballads with the minstrel show in mind. The successful "Gilmore Band" leader, Patrick Gilmore, introduced his raggy composition "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" in 1863 during the Civil War.

In the 70's and 80's a new form of entertainment called vaudeville and burlesque shows began to flourish in competition with minstrel shows. The burlesque ingredient largely centered on comedy and musical skits depicting racial characteristics in an exaggerated manner. Negroes, Irishmen, Italians, Englishmen, and Jews were

often the subject of burlesque.

James Bland, a negro, was a noted composer of the 70's. In the years 1878 and 1879 his four best compositions appeared, namely, "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny", "In the Evening By the Moonlight", and of even more significance to our subject, "Oh, Dem Golden Slippers" and "Hand Me Down My Walking Stick (Cane)".

Ed Harrigan and Tony Hart had introduced their first "Mulligan Guard" skit as early as 1873 at the Academy of Music in Chicago. The Harrigan and Hart "Mulligan Guard" shows dominated the New York musical burlesque scene from 1878 until the mid-eighties. Their English-born composer David Braham composed many songs with an English Music Hall flavour such as "The Pitcher of Beer" and "The Skidmore Fancy Ball".

The thrust toward ragtime has become increasingly evident in recent years. Perhaps the listing of a few examples will speak for themselves, bearing in mind the Harney notion that ragtime is merely a "way" of playing:

1891 - Ta-ra-ra-boom-der-e' (Sayers)
1892 - The Man That Broke The Bank at Monte Carlo (Gilbert)
1893 - Banjo Twang (Drumheller)
1894 - And Her Golden Hair Was Hanging Down Her Back (Rosenfeld & McGlennon)
1895 - My Best Girl's a New Yorker (Stromberg)
1896 - A Hot Time In The Old Town (Hayden & Metz)

The year late Columbian Exposition held at Chicago in 1893 to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the discovery of American by Columbus in 1492 had served as a melting pot for the primitive beginnings of ragtime. Many pianists visited Chicago in 1893 and spent much time listening to each other. One of them was Scott Joplin, who, in this year of 1896, has settled down in the railroad center of Sedalia in Missouri. The music now being played by Joplin, Tom Turpin in St. Louis, William Krell along the Mississippi, and by Harney in New York, contains a certain pulsating lilt that is fresh and captivating. Ragtime is about to evolve into a king of music that is much more than the syncopated versions of other more serious music. There is an originality about Ragtime that defies contradiction. It is true that fragments of the ragtime sound have been heard for many years. But the stimulating, warm and satisfying completeness of a classical ragtime composition has yet to be written and performed.

As we look back across the years to the ragtime barrenness of 1896, with a knowledge of the magnificent classic ragtime compositions that emerged in the twenty year period which followed, one cannot help but conclude that ragtime forms a separate body of music in its own right.

The Gay Nineties are about to begin in earnest and to mark the occasion, the curtain is rising on "Those Ragtime Years"

JOHN S. WILSON APPLAUDS RAGTIME

from The New York Times-Sunday, August 3, 1969.

If ever there were a form of music that seemed to be wrapped up, packed away and completely finished so far as recordings are concerned, it should be ragtime. This music flourished for a brief 20-year period long, long ago (approximately 1897 to 1917) without finding its way onto recordings to any great extent. It did reach piano rolls, some of which have been transferred to disks, but their limitations only served to preserve false ideas about the use of dynamics--or, as it appears on piano rolls, the lack of dynamics--in a piano rag.

Follow this up with years of distortion of the basic ragtime piano technique by honky tonk pianists playing in slapdash vaudeville style for comic effect while wearing an almost obligatory costume of sleeve garters, derby tipped over the eyes and well-chewed cigar butt in mouth. Under the circumstances, it's a wonder that the music survived at all..

That it has not only survived but seems to be developing a new, spreading and enthusiastic audience can be attributed to some persistent spots of light in an otherwise murky half century for this music. There is the writing of Rudi Blesh who, with Harriet Janis, told the story of the rag men in "They All Played Ragtime." There are the performances and recordings by Wally Rose, Knocky Parker and Ralph Sutton (although Sutton disclaims any real interest in piano rags), and, more recently, the television and theatrical success of Max Morath. There is the interest-rousing support of The Ragtime Society (P. O. Box 125, Weston, Ontario, Canada) and the appearance of a new breed of pianist who takes the music seriously.

One of the most unusual and delightful products of this ragtime renaissance is a collection of classic rags in arrangements that were used by John Robichaux, one of the popular orchestra leaders in New Orleans during the ragtime era, which are played by a contemporary group, "The New Orleans Ragtime Orchestra" (Pearl 7; Pearl Records, 821 Maple St.. Salisbury, N. C. 28144).

The orchestra was organized by Lars Edegran, a young Swedish pianist visiting New Orleans, who came across the arrangements in the Archives of New Orleans Jazz at Tulane University and, with some friends, began playing the parts to see how they would sound.

In these arrangements, the lead is played by the violin, usually with clarinet doubling the lead and occasionally with cornet also doubling, although both clarinet and cornet are also involved with countermelodies, This makes for a light, translucent projection of the melody with trombone and cello filling out the background.

The performances, mostly at moderate tempos, have a stately charm which, as one adjusts to the rhythmic qualities, develops something close to that sense of swing that one would find in an out-and-out jazz performance. The playing is not always letter perfect and it sometimes conveys a feeling of determined reading. But the flavor is delightful.

The tunes are all out of the top drawer of ragdom--Scott Joplin's "Original Rags", "The Cascades," "The Crysanthemum"; James Scott's "Grace and Beauty" and "Sunburst Rag"; Joseph Lamb's "Contentment", "Reindeer Rag" and "Ethiopia"; Artie Matthews's "Pastime Rag" and J. Bodewalt Lampe's "Creole Belles".

Three of Joplin's rags--"Maple Leaf Rag", "Easy Winners" and "Piano Rollin' Rag"-- are included in the "original cast" recording of Max Morath's one-man entertainment, "Max Morath--At the Turn of the Century" (RCA Victor LSO 1159). Morath's highly communicative affection for the songs, foibles and musical styles of the days when ragtime flourished, which lit up the Jan Hus Playhouse when this presentation played there last season, comes through equally well in this recorded version. It includes, in addition to the piano rags, such period pieces as "How Do You Do It, Mabel (On Twenty Dollars a Week)", a Bert William song, a typical tear jerker ("Don't Go in That Lion's Cage"), Jelly Roll Morton's explanation of his development of "Tiger Rag" from a French quadrille -- all delivered with Morath's wry observations and his infectious elan.

On stage, Morath was literally a "one-man show", providing all the musical accompaniment himself on piano. On the recording, however, the accompaniment has been expanded through arrangements by Fred Karlin that call in a large and lively ensemble. This happens, fortunately, only at appropriate times, for Karlin has had the perspicacity to cut down to the gentle strum of a guitar or the soft, cushioning ring of a single vibra-harp note when that is all that is needed.

Morath also turns up on "They All Play Ragtime" (Jazzology 52; Jazzology Records, P. O. Box 748, Columbia, S. C. ), a collection of performances by six contemporary piano rag men (plus one by the late Joseph Lamb), most of whom play compositions of their own as well as a few from the classic period.

The set indicates the vitality of the renewed interest in ragtime. Donald Ashwander is particularly impressive both as a performer, playing James Scott's "Calliope Rag" and two pieces of his own, and as a composer--his "Friday Night" is a first rate rag, a lilting, melodic piece that holds together from beginning to end. John Arpin stays with the classics--pieces by Tom Turpin and Arthur Marshall--playing with a light and airy charm. Morath delivers three numbers with his usual professional aplomb. The others involved are Tom Shea, Peter Lundberg and Trebor Jay Tichenor.

The current ragtimers are not exclusively male, as this list might imply. Lois Delano, a Tacoma pianist--a raglady?--plays a group of rags and other compositions by one of the more prolific composers of the ragtime period, Joe Jordan, on "The Music of Joe Jordon" (Arpeggio 1205; Arpeggio Records, P. O. Box 125, Weston, Ontario, Canada).

Besides writing rags (his best known effort, "That Teasin' Rag", is included in this set) and popular songs, Jordan was an arranger and conductor, musical director of the first all-Negro theater in Chicago, the Pekin. He was also arranger and assistant conductor of Jim Europe's famous orchestra, leader of several groups of his own and a composer on the staff of Florenz Ziegfeld. It was at Ziegfeld's suggestion that Jordan wrote "Lovey Joe", a song that gained stardom for Fanny Brice in the Ziegfeld Follies in 1910.

Miss Delano studied for several years with Jordan, who was 86 when this recording was made in 1968. She draws on his work from 1902 to 1920, concentrating on his rags, but including some songs and instrumental compositions. Jordan had a pleasant melodic flair and Miss Delano gives his pieces a lively treatment. On most of the selections she uses a strong, positive attack that eventually produces a sense of sameness but she gives an appropriately sensitive interpretation to the gently glimmering "Whippoorwill Rag".

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J. W. BOONE, Pianist, 10 N. 4th St., Columbia, Mo.

# THE INCOMPARABLE BLIND BOONE

by MADGE HARRAH

A city rescues from anonymity a native son who was a musical prodigy and an entertainment legend.

On March 15, 1961, in a memorial concert, the citizens of Columbia, Missouri, honoured the phenomenal pianist, John William (Blind) Boone.

This remarkable man, once admired throughout the world, until last spring lay near Columbia in an unmarked grave, unknown to the "Rock and Roll" generation. Nostalgic older Columbians finally remedied this neglect.

In 1960, Missouri State Senator Basey Vanlandingham and Columbia Chamber of Commerce secretary Charles Isley organized a committee to provide a marker for Boone's grave and to establish a music scholarship in his name. The March concert, featuring "Ragtime" Bob Darch playing Boone's ragtime and classical compositions and the Lincoln University Chorus singing arrangements of Boone's songs, was for this purpose.

Also, in early February of this year, at the cornerstone ceremonies, Columbia's new Negro lowcost housing project was christened the "John William Boone Housing Development".

In addition, local radio and television shows re-acquainted the public with the facts of Boone's life, These facts read like legend.

John William Boone was born in May, 1864, in the Seventh Militia army camp in Miami, Missouri, where his father was a bugler and his mother, Rachael Boone, former slave of the descendants of Daniel Boone, was a contraband cook.

When Boone was only six months old, his infected eyes were removed following an attach of nearly fatal "brain fever". Thereafter, he was known as Blind Willie or Blind Boone.

At an early age, he revealed his unique musical talent by making up and singing songs, accompanied by intricate rhythms on a pan-lid. While visiting a home in Warrensburg, Missouri, where his mother worked as laundress, he touched a piano for the first time. He later described the thrill--as the chords vibrated up his arms and into his soul--as the most important moment in his life.

Growing older, he played his harmonica for pennies on the streets of Warrensburg, and then organized his own street-urchins' band. His talent was recognized by Senator Cockrell, who arranged in 1873 to have him sent to the St. Louis School for the Blind to be educated.

There Boone became friends with Enock Donley, a piano-student, who was amazed when Boone sat down and repeated difficult compositions which Donley had played for him only once.

"He's a genius!" Donley told the superintendent of the school, who soon invited Boone into his own home to perform for his guests.

The next year, however, a new superintendent was appointed who segregated the Negro students and put Boone to work weaving brooms. Boone became so unhappy that he left the school and wandered about St. Louis, making his living by playing honky-tonk tunes on his harmonica in Franklin Avenue and Morgan Street bars. At last he met a train conductor who was so impressed with his playing that he let Boone ride free back to Warrensburg.

Once there, Boone was ashamed to face his former benefactors. They treated him kindly, however, and soon Boone's band was once more performing at local picnics and fairs.

Then Boone met a traveling gambler named Mark Cromwell, who persuaded Boone to run away with him to "make your fortune". Cromwell promised that he would write Boone's mother and send her money from Boone's successes; but, once away from Warrensburg, Cromwell gambled with the money Boone made and beat the boy when he complained or tried to escape.

They traveled together from town to town, keeping just ahead of Boone's stepfather, Sam Hendrix, who was trying to rescue the blind boy. In Columbia, Missouri, Cromwell dressed Boone in Girls clothing to escape detection; but he became nervous over the growing suspicion of the residents, and so he gambled Boone off in a game of "seven-up poker" to Sam Reiter, who kept Boone a prisoner in an attic for three days.

Then Cromwell stole Boone back from Reiter and fled from Columbia on foot; but Sam Hendrix caught up with him in Ladonia, Missouri, and regained his son at last.

Back home in Warrensburg, Boone was greeted as a hero. He soon grew restless, however, and organized a trio consisting of himself, banjoist Tom Johnson of Sedalia, and harmonica-player Ben Franklin, called the "Teacup Artist" because he warbled his harmonica into a teacup. These three hitched rides on trains and performed for tips from the passengers.

Boone's fame began to grow. In December, 1879, John Lange, superintendent of the Negro Baptist Church in Columbia, asked Boone to come and play the piano for a week of special Christmas services. Boone accepted, and remained afterwards for a visit in John Lange's home.

Just after New Year's, Blind Tom, another noted Negro pianist, stopped in Columbia at the Heyden Opera House for a one-night stand. At the end of the program, Blind Tom's manager challenged the audience to produce any pianist who might outplay Tom. John Lange led the protesting fifteen-year-old Boone onstage. Boone played, and Tom repeated his performance. Then Tom played a difficult number, and Boone repeated Tom;s performance without missing a single note. The people in the audience went wild with excitement.

"Give him the chance", they shouted, "and Boone can be as great as Tom!"

Boone was given that chance, and soon far excelled Tom, for Tom was a musical freak, subnormal in intelligence, while Boone possessed true musical sensitivity and a fantastic memory rarely equaled in the history of the world.

For instance, returning to some small town where he had played years before, he could recall the names of people he had previously met just from the sound of a voice or the pressure of a hand.

Once, when he was trying out pianos in a music store, a woman entered and said to the proprietor, "I performed on the same program with him twenty-four years ago in excerpts from 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'. Let's see if he remembers my voice." She spoke to him and asked, "Do you know who I am?"

"Of course," beamed Boone. You're Little Ev

Boone traveled, with Lange as his manager, for over forty years, performing throughout the United States and Europe and receiving praise both from royalty and from such eminent musicians as Paderewski and Rachmaninoff.

Boone played Liszt, Chopin and Beethoven in the first half of a concert, saying, "You've got to hit that music critic right between the eyes." Then, following intermission, he said, "Now I'll put the cookies on the lower shelf where everyone can reach them," and played ragtime variations on popular themes and folk tunes. He is credited with being the first performer to bring the Negro spiritual to the concert stage.

Once, after Lange had read to him an account of a destructive tornado in Marshfield, Missouri, Boone improvised a solo imitating the sounds of the storm. He played with his wrists and elbows, as well as with his fingers, and included the sound of the Sunday morning church bells preceding the wind and rain. When he later performed this number in Marshfield, half his audience fled the building in terror, thinking a real sotrm was on the way. Thereafter, he included "The Marshfield Tornado" in his regular repertoire.

Boone travelled nine months of the year, returning to Columbia each summer to rest. He and Lange both became wealthy and acquired property in Columbia and in Kansas City. Boone also owned several large diamond rings, a diamond cross stick-pin, many diamond encrusted medals, several gold-headed canes, and a chiming gold and diamond watch of which he was especially proud.

Following Lange's death at the end of World War I, Boone's career began to falter. A series of incompetent and dishonest managers robbed him of much of his wealth. His luck changed briefly for the better in the early Twenties when he became associated with Wayne B. Allen, Columbia music store owner and song-publisher.

Allen admired Boone to the point of hero-worship and did the best he could for the agin pianist. Asked how he became Boone's manager, the late Mr. Allen related the following story.

"I found that a man here in town had given Boone some papers to sign, under the guise of business, which turned out to be checks for large sums of money and deeds to much of his property. I've never been so mad! I went to this man's office and leveled my pistol at his heart. 'You've known me all your life', I said, ' and you know I mean what I say. Either you tear up those deeds or I drop you where you stand!' He tore up the deeds. Then I went to Boone and said, 'Don't ever sign another thing until I've read it first. So he made me his manager, and I booked him for fifteen hundred concerts over the next five years, until his death in 1927, when I cancelled fifty-seven concerts in Illinois alone."

Mr. Allen told another interesting story about Boone.

"After I became his manager, we traveled together to Chicago where Boone was to audition for a piano-roll company. After we arrived, we found that the company had already hired a man from California. I left Boone in the lobby and went upstairs where the company's officials were gathered. I said, 'I don't care who you've hired, I have a man downstairs who can outplay anyone in the world!' They said 'Prove it!' I said, 'All right,' and I wrote out a check to the company for a thousand dollars! Then I said, 'If this man can't do everything I've claimed, I'll sign this check! So I brought in Boone, and they brought in the man from California. Tension was running high. The Californian played first, for a half-hour, his own composition, and he played well. When he finished at last, Boone applauded warmly, then walked unassisted over to a second piano which he had located by the over-tones. Without even sitting down, he said, 'That was very good. This is the part I liked best,' and he whipped through the middle section without a flaw. Those men went wild! The Californian shook my hand and said in a broken voice, 'My God, I'd go to Hell and back for that man!' The next day Boone played the 'Marshfield Tornado' for the rolls, but he went so fast and played so hard that he stripped the gears in the machine; so we came back to Missouri without a record of it, and now it's lost to the world!"

Allen saved many of Boone's compositions, however, by publishing such ragtime classics as "Ragtime Melody Number 1" and "Ragtime Melody Number 2 with Strains from the Flatbranch," the latter containing an interesting section of original walking-base boogie. Allen also published Boone's "classical" compositions, such as the elaborate "Love Feast Waltz," composed when a girl bet her sweetheart that Boone could improvise from notes chosen at random on the keyboard.

Mr. Allen sometimes grew emotional when talking about Boone. "He was the greatest man I ever knew," he would say. "There should be a monument to him in this town; yet there isn't even a stone on his grave."

Now, thirty-four years after Blind Boone's death, one of America's most unusual pianists has received his monument.

# SOMETHING DOING...

JOHN ARPIN - appearing at Sutton Place Hotel (Stop 33), Bay and Wellesley in Toronto between 5:30 and 8:00 p. m.

DON BURNS - appearing in Hamburg, New York.

JAKI BYARD - appearing at the Top of the Gate, New York, corner of Bleecker and Thompson in Greenwich Village.

BOB DARCH - appearing at Fairbanks, Alaska, last we heard.

DON EWELL - appearing with the Dukes of Dixieland.

JOHNNY MADDOX - Cherry Creek Inn, August 25th to October 4th.

KEN MAYHERCY - "Ragtime $ Bill" is appearing Saratoga, Wyo.

MAX MORATH - His off Broadway Show "At the Turn of the Century" is on the road.

WALLY ROSE - appearing at the Gold Dust Lounge, 247 Powell St., San Francisco.

LOWELL SCHREYER - at Michael's Gay 90's Restaurant (banjo) Saturday nights in Mankato, Minn. (He has been here for 7 years.)

BOB SEELY - at Charlie Brown's in Detroit, Michigan

RALPH SUTTON - at Sunnie's in Aspen, Colorado.

TREBOR TICHENOR and The St. Louis Ragtimers:
can be heard on the Goldenrod Showboat in St. Louis, Missouri.

TEX WYNDHAM and The Red Lion Jazz Band:
at Tyler's Restaurant, 1101 Philadelphia Pike, Wilmington, Del.

# BLIND BOONE'S

# SOUTHERN RAG MEDLEY

## No TWO

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60

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